

THE WHITE DEER





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A LATVIAN FOLK-TALE

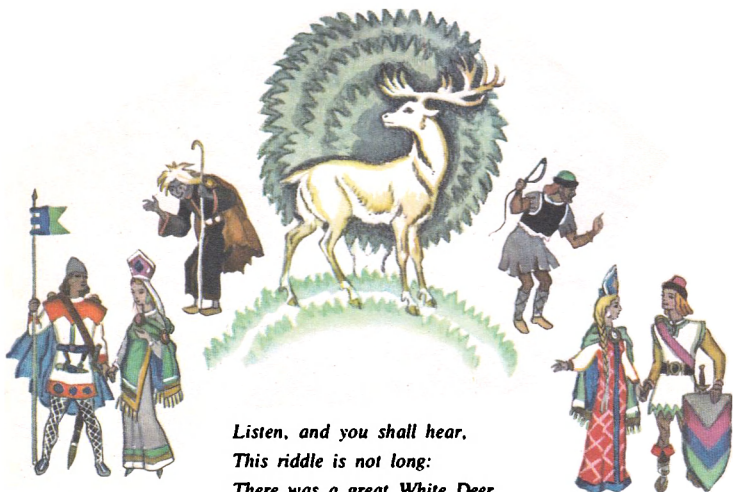
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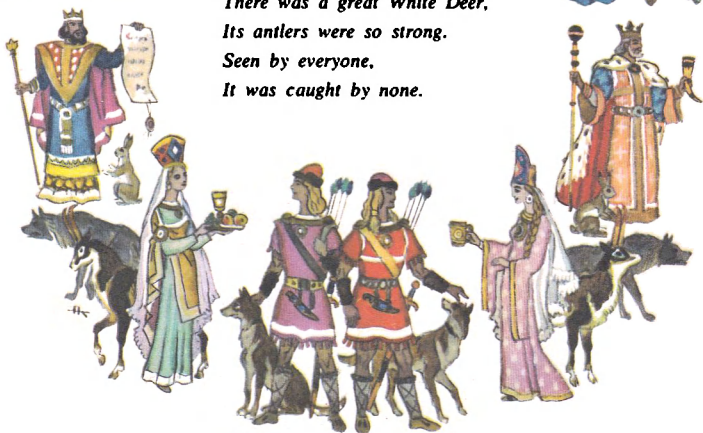


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*Listen, and you shall hear,
This riddle is not long:
There was a great White Deer,
Its antlers were so strong.
Seen by everyone,
It was caught by none.*





Once upon a time there were two brothers. They grew up together as strong as two oaks by the river. One day their father said to them, "Tell me truthfully what trade you would choose."

His sons shook their heads at first, but finally confessed, "We'd like to be carpenters. But we'd much rather be hunters and hunt geese and wild ducks."



Their father listened to what they said and then gave each son a bow and arrows and a good dog. He saw them to the gate and wished them good luck.

And so the brothers set out. After a while they came upon a flock of wild ducks. They both tried shooting their arrows, but did not hit anything. By then they discovered that they had wandered into a



dense forest and could not find their way out. Although they had very little food left, they decided that come what may they would not lose heart.

Suddenly they spotted two antelopes. When the brothers raised their bows, the animals spoke to them in human voices. "Don't shoot us. We'll help you in time of need," they said.

So brothers continued on their way. Soon they saw two wolves. They raised their bows, but the wolves said, "Don't shoot us. We'll help you in time of need."

They continued on their way once again. Soon they came upon two hares. The brothers raised their bows again, but the hares said, "Don't shoot us. We'll help you in time of need."

Thus did each of the brothers gain three true friends among the forest animals: an antelope, a grey wolf and a hare, to say nothing of their faithful dogs.

They went on until they came to a cross-roads where they began to argue as to which road to take. Finally they decided that one would take one road and the other would take the other road and each would seek his own fortune. Before parting they decided that each of them would stick his knife into the trunk of an old oak. Later each would come back to the spot to see how his brother was faring. If his knife was shiny and sharp it meant he was making out well. If his knife was rusty it meant he was in trouble and needed his brother's help.







They bid each other goodbye. One brother took the left road, while the other took the right road.

The elder brother walked on for a day and did not come upon anything. He walked on for a second day and did not come upon anything, either. Then, on the third day, he saw a hewn castle with the front and sides made of pine and the turret lost in the clouds. Though there was not a soul outside, a young maiden sat by the window.

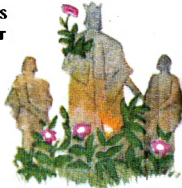
"Tell me, pretty maiden, where has everyone gone?" the elder brother said.

"They went off to track the great White Deer, but they've all been turned into grey rocks and stones. My poor father was one of them."

"Don't worry, fair maiden. They went off without any helpers, but see how many friends I have! They'll help me track the great White Deer, and I'll rescue your father as well."

The riddle was short, but the story is longer.

When the elder brother reached the gate he saw the great White Deer running by. He dashed after it with his antelope, grey wolf, dog and hare at his heels. But it was not as easy as he thought, for the White Deer







simply vanished, with a faint haze to mark the spot where it had been.

An old hag sat by a fire at the edge of the forest nearby. The elder brother went up to her and said, "Will you let me warm myself by your fire, Granny?"

"Yes, do. You won't bother me. Just let me pat your beasties first. I shan't harm them."

"Go right ahead."

The moment the old hag touched the animals they turned to grey stones and rocks, as did the elder brother.

Meanwhile, the younger brother wandered back and forth in a great



forest. He finally came out near a kingdom where he stayed on to tend the king's sheep.

Soon a terrible calamity befell the kingdom. A great dragon crawled out of the churning sea and demanded that the king's three daughters be given to it for its dinner. The dragon said that if its wish were not granted, it would churn up the sea with its tail and great waves would flood the king's cities.

The king was heart-broken. He promised his youngest daughter in marriage to anyone who would slay the dragon. The word was spread far and wide, but no one was brave enough to come forward.



The king bewailed his daughters' fate, but tears and sighs were of no help. The very next morning his elder daughter was to be taken to the dragon for its dinner.

The younger brother heard of this. He could not see why the princess had to end her life in the dragon's belly. All that day he tended the flocks, but during the night he and his faithful animals forged a mighty sword.

At the crack of dawn a palace groom drove the eldest princess to the dragon, passing the meadow where the younger brother was tending the flocks.

"Hey, there! Where are you going?" the shepherd called to the groom.

"To the dragon. Where else would we be going? Are you so brave you'd count the dragon's teeth, shepherd?"

"I might try," the younger brother replied and followed the cart.

The groom pulled up on the sand by the churning sea. The eldest princess stepped down, weeping bitter tears and pleading for someone to come to her rescue. But no, the groom quickly led the horses away from the water's edge and from the trouble, saying that he was unarmed and could not take on the dragon alone.

Then the sea turned dark and terrible and a three-headed monster appeared from the waves.

The younger brother's faithful animals attacked it, while he jumped onto one of the horses and struck off the dragon's three



heads with a single blow of his mighty sword. He then cut out their tongues and tossed them into his shepherd's bag. Saying not a word to anyone, as if this were only as it should be, he went quietly back to the flocks.

The groom, meanwhile, wanted to play the hero and said to the princess, "See? We saved you! But mind you don't tell a soul that the shepherd was here, too, or I'll kill you. If the king asks you, you're to say, 'The groom took me to the sea and brought me back again. He's the one to be rewarded.'"

The princess had no choice but to consent, for she did not want to lose her life.

The very next day a six-headed monster appeared from the churning sea.

The same groom now took the king's second daughter to be the dragon's dinner, passing the same meadow where the younger brother was tending the flocks. This time, too, the shepherd saved the princess. When he cut off the dragon's six tongues he tossed them into his bag again.

On the third day the same groom took the king's youngest daughter to be the dragon's dinner, for a third time passing the meadow where the younger brother was tending the flocks. And for the third time the shepherd followed the cart.

For a third time the groom stopped the cart on the sand by the churning sea. The youngest princess stepped down, weeping bitter tears and pleading for someone to rescue her. But no, for a third time the groom quickly led the horses away from the water's edge and from trouble, saying that he was unarmed and could not take on the dragon alone.

Then the sea turned dark and terrible and a nine-headed monster appeared from the waves. The younger brother's faithful animals attacked it, while he struck off the dragon's nine heads with a single blow of his mighty sword. At this the youngest princess slipped the shepherd her ring when the groom was not looking. The younger brother bowed low and then cut out the dragon's nine tongues and tossed them into his shepherd's bag. Saying not a word to anyone, as if this were only as it should be, he went quietly back to the flocks.





The groom, meanwhile, wanted to play the hero and said to the princess, "See? We saved you! But mind you don't tell a soul that the shepherd was here, too, or I'll kill you. If the king asks you, you're to say, 'The groom took me to the sea and brought me back again. He's the one to be rewarded.'"

The youngest princess had no choice but to consent, for she did not want to lose her life.

Meanwhile, the king was overcome with joy. He embraced the groom and said, "You've saved all my daughters from a terrible death. Now hear my will: I give you the youngest princess in marriage and half of my kingdom besides."

No sooner said than done. The wedding was to be held in three days' time.

But what about the shepherd? Well, he shouldered his bag and made his way into the palace.





When the youngest princess saw him she said to her father, "I'll marry the one who has my ring and who rescued me from the dragon."

Just then the groom handed the princess a goblet of wine. She took a sip and passed it on to the shepherd. He, in turn, dropped her ring into it when the groom was not looking.

Then the princess said to the king, "He is the one who saved me!"

But the king would not believe her.

"If my ring is not proof enough, then I shall marry the one who has the dragon's tongues."

"Come," said the king to the groom, "show us the dragon's tongues, for the wedding feast awaits us."

But where was the groom to get them if he did not have them? There was nothing he could say.

Meanwhile, the younger brother came to stand beside the princess and showed the king all eighteen of the dragon's tongues.

The king said the shepherd was to be dressed in cloth of gold and married to his youngest daughter, while the sly and sneaky groom was to be banished from the palace forever.

Thus did the younger brother marry the beautiful princess and receive half of the kingdom besides. His life was a happy one from that day on.

One day, however, he decided to go to



the oak tree and look at his brother's knife. It was rusted to the very hilt and that meant his brother was in great trouble. Though he hated to part with his wife, the younger brother called to his faithful dog, antelope, wolf and hare and set off to search for his brother.

He walked on and on until he came to a hewn castle with the front and sides made of pine and the turret lost in the clouds. Though there was not a soul outside, a young maiden sat by the window.

"Tell me, pretty maiden, where has everyone gone?" the younger brother said.

"They went off to track the great White Deer, but they've all been turned into grey rocks and stones. Another hunter came by here. He was also looking for the White Deer."

"Why, that was my brother! I must rescue him."

The riddle was short, but the story is longer.

When the younger brother reached the gate he saw the great White Deer running by. He dashed after it with his faithful animals at his heels. But it was not as easy as he thought, for the White Deer simply vanished, with a faint haze to mark the spot where it had been.

An old hag sat by a fire at the edge of the forest nearby. The younger brother went up to her and said, "Tell me, Granny, what are all these grey rocks and stones about here?"



"Just let me pat your beasties first. I shan't harm them," she said. "Then I'll tell you."

"Oh, no. You're as sly as a fox, but I'm no fool, either. See how sharp my sword is?"

And so the old witch had to confess. "These rocks were once people and those stones were animals," she said. "Your brother's one of them."

"Tell me how to break the spell, and don't forget, my sword is very sharp."

"See the fire? Take some ashes from it and sprinkle them over the rocks and stones."

The younger brother did just that. Indeed, the rocks turned into people, a whole kingdom of people, with their king among them. And there was his elder brother and his faithful beasts. The animals all rushed at the witch and that was the end of her.

How happy everyone was! The king gave the elder brother his daughter in marriage, for the witch had cast a spell on her, too, and the princess could never leave the palace until the spell was broken.

The younger brother returned to his wife and they lived happily ever after.

But what about the White Deer?

Listen, and you shall hear. At the very moment the witch died the White Deer tripped over a tree stump and the spell the witch had cast on it was broken. From then on it ran freely through the forests, never bringing harm to anyone.





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